

# Territorial Embeddedness and Geographical Origin Certifications in the European Union

## The Case of a Romanian Cheese

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### Introduction

**F**OOD IS one of the key cultural objects which materialize collective identities and belonging. The connection is not only reproduced through everyday practices, but also enforced through policies and institutional initiatives, as well as shaped by market forces. The establishment of a national cuisine is a common component of nation-building processes and foods often grow into contentious geopolitical issues.<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of food and eating practices in the category of heritage is acquiring more public legitimacy, as UNESCO is increasingly including foods and foodways on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In the European Union, one of the key instruments connecting food with collective identities is the protectionist framework of quality schemes, which includes two instruments based on geographical origin: the Protected Designation of Origin (hereafter PDO) and the Protected Geographical Indication (hereafter PGI).

From its accession to the EU in 2007, Romania has been a slow adopter of such instruments of protection, with only one registered product during its first nine years as a member state. Romania's record has multiplied exponentially since 2016, with eight other products registered in the past six years.

In this article, I analyze the application file of *Telemea de Ibănești* cheese, the only PDO product that Romania has registered so far, exploring the strategies used by Romanian producers in their participation to the protectionist framework of EU geographical indications. I examine the discursive construction of the cheese's territorial embeddedness, with the objective of capturing the sources of added value. Artisanship, production techniques and methods, historicity, sensorial properties, or even chemical characteristics (nutrient content), together with geographical references, are some of the typical dimensions employed by the producers when embedding their products. I regard the localizing discourse as a means of aligning memory to entrepreneurial needs, while responding to the

homogenizing framework of EU certifications: how do the applying producers incorporate territorial elements in the construction of geographical origin in the case of cheeses?

I have selected cheese as a focus of analysis based on the premise that cheeses carry a particular symbolic weight for a population whose food system is defined and shaped by a long history of pastoralism.

## The Territorial Embeddedness of Food Products

FOOD POLITICS double as territorial identity politics, in what food geographer Roberta Sonnino<sup>2</sup> describes as territorially embedded food systems, such as the case of France or Italy. The categories organizing these systems, such as *terroir* in France and *prodotto tipico* in Italy, are central references for how the European Union has created an institutionalized framework for gastropolitics, through the introduction of geographical indication products.

The French notion of *terroir* describes a system where the interaction between human factors and the physical milieu “links actors—their histories, their social organizations—their activities, notably their agricultural practices . . . and a section of territory with its ecological characteristics.”<sup>3</sup> The Italian category of typical products (*prodotti tipici*), according to Siniscalchi,<sup>4</sup> is defined in relation to temporality and to space, by the repetitiveness of a group’s food practices through time, limited to a certain social, administrative, and geographical space.

The politics of the typical have a place-making effect, enhanced once institutionalized instruments of protection, such as the certifications of origins, are employed. Creating a PDO, for example, forces the applicants to manipulate the spatial limits of production, with frequent exclusionary results. This has often been a contentious issue undermining the legitimacy of and the consensus around the certification process.

*Terroir*-inspired geographically-based food narratives have become institutionalized and homogenized at European Union level, under a regulatory framework for quality products featuring two territorially embedded certifications: the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) quality schemes. The identity of geographical indication food products is linked to an arguably unique symbiosis<sup>5</sup> of local characteristics, including geographical elements, biogenetic heritage (e.g. breeds), botanical worlds, and human producers. Identifying food products through place-making is a socio-cultural construction, where “embeddedness . . . involves a dynamic process of attribution of meanings through which social actors construct and defend the connection between a product and a place.”<sup>6</sup> Embeddedness relies on the construction of a bioregional discourse, where the identity of the social actors involved “is grounded within a revised and exclusive symbiosis of nature, animals and actors.”<sup>7</sup>

The bioregional discourse of *terroir*-like narratives does not solely negotiate and define localness for mere identity reasons, but it fuels the product’s projection onto a market of commodities on a scale larger than the local level. Siniscalchi refers to an “economy of the typical,” to describe the process through which the discourse of territorially-em-

bedded goods infused with identity values produces commodified goods. This particular instance of commodification, coined “commodity-heritage”<sup>8</sup> or “commodification of authenticity”<sup>9</sup> is expected to have a dislocating effect,<sup>10</sup> resulting into higher availability of food products outside the local milieu in which their value was created. This can be due to the higher market value accrued by the products, or to the access to large-scale distribution chains, or even boutique retail, as premium or quality products, once the product becomes established as PDO or PGI, for example.

## The Institutionalization of Geographical Origin

**I**N 1992 the European Union established a system of quality certifications, which included two instruments for the protection of foods on the basis of their geographical origins, understood as qualities, characteristics, or a reputation essentially attributable to a place of origin: the protected designation of origin (PDO) and the protected geographical indication (PGI). The system is based on the principle of interdependence between the physical characteristics of the place of production and the local producers’ knowledge transmitted and continued throughout the generations.

The PDO describes an agricultural product or a foodstuff,

*whose quality or characteristics are essentially or exclusively due to a particular geographical environment with its inherent natural and human factors; and the production steps of which all take place in the defined geographical area.*<sup>11</sup>

The PGI label is granted to foods “whose given quality, reputation or other characteristic is essentially attributable to its geographical origin; and at least one of the production steps of which take place in the defined geographical area.”<sup>12</sup> The two certifications establish intellectual property rights to a consortium of applicants, which can be made up of producers, processors, cultivators, and animal breeders. The applicants commit to respecting a task book of production methods and product characteristics (physical, chemical, organoleptic and microbiological). Proof of the product’s historical connection with the area of production needs to be provided, as well as the link between a specific quality, the reputation, or other characteristics of the agricultural product or foodstuff, and the geographical origin.

The application is addressed to the Member State, which examines it and forwards it to the European Commission for a final decision. The Commission subjects the application to potential objections from other countries and then publishes the registration in the *Official Journal of the European Union*.

Judging by the relative numbers of national dossiers, Romanian producers are reluctant to authenticate their food products under the geographical schemes: there is only one Romanian label (*Magiun de Topoloveni*) registered as EU PGI between 2007 and 2016. From 2016 onwards, the rhythm has increased exponentially, with eight more Romanian foods having successfully applied for the PGI or PDO status up to date: three cheeses, *Tele-*

*mea de Ibănești, Telemea de Sibiu, and Cașcaval de Săveni, two meats, Cârnați de Pleșcoi and Salam de Sibiu, as well as three fish products, Novac afumat din Țara Bârsei, Scrumbie de Dunăre afumată and Salată cu icre de știucă de Tulcea.* Some of the factors connected with Romania's slow response to the certification scheme pertain to the local dynamic of the Romanian market of quality products, which I briefly discuss below.

## The Post-Socialist Transition of Romanian Foods from Tradition to Geographical Origins

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL research interest in the effects of the accession to the European Union on the reconfiguration of the post-socialist member states' food systems has had multiple foci, ranging from the Europeanization of foods and gastrationalism to nostalgia for socialist industrial brands, the creation of informal networks and other forms of resistance to the new standards of production, and the reconfiguration of consumer cultures.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth C. Dunn<sup>14</sup> describes the EU as a technozone for food producers, characterized by increasingly exclusionary standards. This can push some producers to the margins of the food systems, engaged in local informal economies. The participation in the system of EU food quality schemes (which includes geographical indications) has accession thresholds pertaining to financial requirements, bureaucratic and market knowledge.

In post-EU accession Romania, the category that made the transition of most small-scale or semi-subsistence producers from the informal economy to the main market were traditional products, whose symbolic significance was enhanced post-2007, as a result of several factors. During state socialism, the design of the food system discouraged regionality and localism as food values, proposing instead a homogenizing system of centralized and industrial production anchored in scientific and technological principles, which included industrial food standards and fixed recipes. Romania's post-socialist transition was characterized by an abrupt post-1989 de-structuring of the national food industry, paired with the development of the informal economy and the opening of the consumer market to global imports. This evolution was increasingly balanced by the institutional interventions to regulate Romanian food production in alignment to European regulations, on the eve of the country's accession to the EU in 2007.<sup>15</sup> Counter-reactions to the perceived standardizing effect of these regulations followed: traditionality, until recently confined to the informal, unauthorized production and sale of cheeses, meats, preserves or baked goods by semi-subsistence farmers, was taken up as one of the central values of the Romanian food systems and a point of leverage in confrontation with the externally-imposed standards. "Traditional," implicitly understood as a value resulting from the peasant savoir faire, became equal to "quality," and was in fact the trigger for an alternative market of "quality food" in Romania.<sup>16</sup> Its consumer appeal was so high around the mid-2000s that the food industry soon picked up on its potential and started to instrumentalize traditionality in the branding of industrial food products.<sup>17</sup> In the context of the perceived homogenizing effect of EU accession, traditionality emerged as

the local declination of “authenticity.” However, for a long time it floated as an indistinct umbrella-term for artisan, non-homogenized, non-global, national quality products. The category was defined more by the semiotic work of producers and consumers than by a strict regulatory framework. Even if stereotypical representations about landscape and territory have come to define food products in areas such as the Saxon villages of Southern Transylvania,<sup>18</sup> Romanian consumers do not consider territorial embeddedness a significant source of added value for product quality and taste.<sup>19</sup>

### The Territorial Embeddedness of *Telemea de Ibănești* Cheese

**B**Y PERFORMING a content analysis of the application file for the only Romanian PDO product, *Telemea de Ibănești* cheese,<sup>20</sup> the research examines the discursive strategies used by the applicant group to document the product’s territorial embeddedness and to create added value extracted from place.

The politics and practices of cheese-making, as well as the labeling and territorial embeddedness of cheese, have been mainstays in the food anthropology literature. In her work on mountain cheese, Cristina Grasseni<sup>21</sup> follows a traditional Alpine cheese-making system in northern Italy and its transformations as it is projected itself in a global context of intangible heritage and quality standards. It focuses on the environmental embedding of the cultural management of local resources and analyses the new discourses of commodification and its dislocation from the position of local artefact, with social and environmental roots, towards the global networks of marketing and logistics.

The certification of cheeses under the EU schemes can provide a conflictual arena for ethnic politics, as suggested by attempts to certify halloumi cheese by Cyprus,<sup>22</sup> where the claims for symbolic ownership between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and the instrumentalization of ethnic nationalism contributed to the temporary failure of the certification process. The shifting ownership of cheeses as a result of the certification process is the focus of an analysis by Sarah May.<sup>23</sup> Following the certification process of two German cheeses listed as PDO, the author captures a phenomenon she titles “exclusive commons,” where a food-making process formerly open to everyone comes to be “reserved” by a specific group of applicant producers, thus contributing to increasing local inequalities. Serpa, a Portuguese cheese certified under the EU Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) scheme, is the object of research by Harry G. West and Nuno Domingos,<sup>24</sup> analyzing the attempts of a Slow Food presidium to reverse the modernization of the cheese’s production process, driven by a romantic and elitist vision associated with the organization. A somewhat similar constructionist process is the focus of Heather Paxson’s study<sup>25</sup> analyzing the *terroir* discourse surrounding cheese from a reverse perspective: the US cheesemakers’ “engineering” of *terroir* as attempts to create a taste of place by European standards, infusing artisan cheeses with environmental and social qualities. The author describes place-making as an intentional process of environmental stewardship, based on the producers’ attempts to reconcile moral and economic values.

According to the Geographical Indications Register,<sup>26</sup> *Telemea de Ibănești* is one of the 234 cheeses with geographical indication in the European Union, 187 of which are registered as PDOs, and 47 as PGIs. Almost half of the total number (110 products) are registered by two of the 27 member states, France and Italy, confirming the two countries' status of territorially embedded food systems.

In the case of *Telemea de Ibănești*, the name identifies it as a variety of cheese produced in Romania, *telemea*, and associates the indication of provenance, Ibănești. The cheese's designated origin is a mountain commune in central Romania (Transylvania), Mureș County, in the Gurghiu Valley, 20 km from the nearest town.

*Telemea*—a white hard cheese typically made of cow's or sheep's milk with a coagulant, salted in brine, is perhaps the most common Romanian cheese. On the national market, cheeses are typically differentiated on the basis of the variety and type (hard, soft, white, yellow, etc.), the type of milk (cow, sheep, or goat), or the degree of maturation (aged or fresh). Few cheese names with a geographical origin attached have accumulated national notoriety, most notably *Telemea de Sibiu*, a cheese associated with the neighboring county of Sibiu, well known for its history of shepherding. *Telemea de Ibănești* was not previously a historical regional brand, enjoying no notoriety as a quality (artisan, traditional, or small-scale) product. The cheese's PDO registered name does not capture a regional history of production, but derives instead from a trademark and a history of production created by the main applicant to the PDO certification.

The product was registered as a PDO in 2016, by a consortium comprising a cheese producer and several cattle breeders from the region. Mirdatod Prod, the milk processing company that produces the cheese, is a local business founded in 1994 in Ibănești by brothers Mircea and David Todoran, hence the acronym. As the PDO certification requires, not only do the product's production, processing, and preparation have to be accomplished locally, but the product's characteristics also need to be exclusively due to the natural and human factors associated with the specific geographical environment.<sup>27</sup> The cheese-producing company initiated the application and created the applicant group, by coopting three cattle breeders' associations from neighboring villages in the Gurghiu Valley, thus ensuring that all the production stages are completed locally. Indicative of the Romanian food market tendency to derive geographical indications from the traditional products category, the group is named the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Products from Gurghiu Valley.

The *terroir* dimensions are spelled out in the PDO application right from the outset of the section asking to document the product's connection to the specified geographic area: a specific flora favoring the breeding of milk cows, the existence of saltwater springs used for preserving cheese, as well as other foods, and the continuity of traditions pertaining to food production and manual crafts. The three dimensions are supported to various extents by the applicants' argument, with some of these dimensions less documented than others, as I will illustrate and discuss below.

The cheese is made—as the application file specifies—from milk collected from the local breeders within the association, who pasture their cattle locally. Once collected, the milk is pasteurized, rennet is added, and then the curd is soaked in brine. The salting stage creates the most remarkable link with the physical milieu, judging from the recur-

rence of the references to brine and brining in the application dossier. The salting liquid is not prepared with freshwater and added salt, but is a natural brine extracted from an underground saltwater well from Orșova village, a settlement two dozen kilometers away from Ibănești. The Orșova saltwater, like other salt groundwaters on the territory of rural communities, is traditionally part of the community's domestic kitchen use, for pickling vegetables, preserving cheese, or curing meats.

## Grazing, Pastures, and Botanical Repertoires in Ibănești

**T**HE LOCAL provenance of fodder ranks among the key features of the milk's *terroir* character: the cows are pastured inside the defined area during summer and are offered locally collected hay during winter. The text attributes the taste and quality of milk to the lack of pollution of the hill and mountain areas where the cows are bred, but no documentation of or explanation for such effects is offered, neither by providing scientific arguments (chemistry analyses of milk or soil, for example), nor by bringing arguments pertaining to the specificities of the area's anthropic impact (absence of local industrial sites).

The botanical dimension of *terroir* is detailed in scientific terms: an inventory of plants is provided, totaling more than a third of the number of known species on the national territory. The concentration is very significant, it is suggested, considering that the designated geographical area only adds up to 0.24% of the country's surface. The types of plants specific to the local meadows contribute—the application claims—to the superior quality of the fodder.

The application states that the cattle breeds owned by the breeders' associations in the consortium are adapted to the local climate conditions, but does not offer specific reference to a certain breed or type of adaptation. It does provide details on the reproduction technique, through the artificial insemination of cows with material from improved breeds, procured from the county seat municipality.

## The Geological and Hydrological Dimensions of Telemea's *Terroir*

**A**SIDE FROM the botanical repertoire, the most specific contribution of the physical milieu to the cheese's *terroir*, judging by the application file, is the mineral content: a particular proportion of salt, calcium, and magnesium is found in the cheese, as a result of the usage of water extracted from the underground saltwater well nearby as natural brine.

The application mentions geological conditions which favored the mineralization of water: the volcanic activity during the Neogene, which left behind mineral sediments, of which the salt resource has been exploited here since Roman times. The immersion of the

curd in saltwater extracts the mineral composition of the area's bedrock and transfers it onto the salted cheese, with lasting results: calcium and magnesium are preserved in the final product, the application argues, with a positive nutritional impact on the consumer. The nutritional value of the brine is explained at length and validated through a recourse to scientific evidence: physical-chemical analyses and test reports. Comparisons between mineral levels are accredited through laboratory reports and reveal a superior content of calcium and magnesium compared to reconstituted brine. Further reference is made to the high nutritional impact of the final product, which provides—it is suggested—a high content of easily-assimilated proteins and amino acids. Health claims are detailed: in the resulting cheese, sodium chloride is replaced by magnesium chloride and calcium chloride, resulting in a lower sodium content, which helps control hypertension and decalcification. Additionally, the mention of the cheese's lower fat content is connected with a higher calcium and magnesium content and a medical recommendation is issued for preventing osteoporosis and developing bone mass. The extraction and transportation technologies are also mentioned: special pumps support the extraction of brine from the saltwater fountain; the water is then transported in tanks to the processing unit.

The description of the resulting cheese, aside from its visual and textural characteristics, is not offered much space in the dossier. There is a sole passing reference to the taste of the cheese, stating that the production process controls for the potential bitterness that the high calcium content can cause.

## *Savoir Faire and Continuity*

**T**HE DOCUMENTATION of the *savoir faire* and the supporting ethnographic or historical evidence are meager. One monographic volume<sup>28</sup> quoted in the application describes cheese as an important product for the Gurghiu Valley. It also mentions the historical practice of householders in the region to use saltwater from the Orșova spring to salt cheese and bacon. One can safely assume that the monographic references imply that the cheese is a *telemea*, but there is no evidence of the association between a name of cheese with the Ibănești toponym. There is likewise no evidence supporting a systematic commercial exchange of regional cheese, outside of past local informal trade: a seasonal spring fair in the Gurghiu Valley, where cheese was also exchanged. There is a reference to a cheesemaker from Ibănești, who is identified as the most skilled in the area, but no additional information about his skill or activity is available, other than his use of wooden vessels.

What is downplayed in the application when it comes to the production practices and technical continuity of cheese production in the area is the actual history of the Mirdatod factory, the current producer of *Telemea de Ibănești* and the initiator of the PDO certification, a very resilient dairy enterprise, in activity since 1994, throughout the post-socialist transition and beyond.

## Discussion

IN THEIR study of the implementation of EU quality schemes in Latvia and Estonia, food scholars Ester Bardone and Astra Spalvena find that, in the case of Estonian Setomaa Soir cheese, submitted for national consideration as a PGI in 2018, the application text legitimates the product's territorial embeddedness mainly through references to folklore and ethnographic archive materials connecting the product to festive, ritualized consumption moments (during the summer solstice celebrations, weddings, and funeral receptions). While the Estonian Soir's *terroir* discourse relies heavily on ethnographic studies, the application for *Telemea de Ibănești* builds an ample connection with the physical milieu and largely circumvents the *savoir faire* and intergenerational transmission.

The case for *Telemea* is built on copious references to production technologies and implications for food safety, with usage of terms such as “tanks,” “pumps,” “chemical reports,” “improved breeds,” “percentages,” “osmotic pressure,” “protein solubility,” etc. The nutritional and health effects of its consumption (such as the mineral content and the low sodium allowing for the control of hypertension and osteoporosis) are also underlined, associating the cheese to the category of technofoods, whose added value is built around their functional properties.

The mineral embeddedness of *Telemea* is central to the *terroir* discourse, in a manner recalling Heather Paxson's argument around the *terroir* effect of local microbial cultures on the creation of raw-milk cheese.<sup>29</sup> The *Telemea* application does not, however, also detail a possible impact of the mineral *terroir* on the taste of the cheese.

The discursive construction of the product's local character, based on mineral embeddedness (the brine's composition), is developed in the framework of singularity economies (see Siniscalchi), articulated around the need to distinguish, delineate, and qualify products.

## Conclusions

WITH A national identity built to a large extent around its pastoral culture, Romania has three cheeses registered as geographical indications, outranking only six other EU countries with fewer records. Throughout the text, I have sought to capture a sample of the geographical indication discourse in the frame of the European Union's quality schemes. I have examined the application file of *Telemea de Ibănești*, a PDO cheese registered by Romania in 2016, focusing on how the text captures the product's territorial embeddedness and the added value of its unique and typical character. The analysis revealed that the application's argument privileges the product's connection with the physical environment, and insists on capturing a sense of a mineral and hydrological *terroir* that is transferred in the end product. Scientific arguments abound, to the detriment of ethnographic and historical documents attesting the productive tradition.

More research is needed to examine the activity of the social actors involved in the application process, as well as on consumers' preferences and attitudes regarding the product and, more generally, EU certification schemes focusing on geographical indications. □

## Notes

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### **Abstract**

#### **Territorial Embeddedness and Geographical Origin Certifications in the European Union: The Case of a Romanian Cheese**

By analyzing the application file of *Telemec de Ibănești* cheese, registered by Romania under the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) quality scheme of the EU, the paper seeks to capture how applicants incorporate territorial elements in the construction of geographical origin. According to the framework delineated by the PDO certifications, the product needs to document characteristics essentially or exclusively due to the geographical environment, including natural or human elements. The analysis attempts to capture how producers employ bioregional discourses, with the purpose of creating the territorial embeddedness of food products, by suggesting a symbiosis of nature, animals and human actors. It shows how the applicants' argument privileges the product's connection with the physical environment and insists on capturing a sense of a mineral and hydrological territorial embeddedness that is transferred in the end product.

### **Keywords**

Protected Designation of Origin, terroir, cheese, bioregional discourse, territorial embeddedness, Romania